

RECORD REVIEWS

GRAMOPHONE

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1757

SORABJI. Organ Symphony No. 1. Kevin Bowyer. Continuum/Harmonia Mundi Ⓢ Ⓢ CCD1001/2 (two discs, nas: 128 minutes: DDD). Played on the Harrison organ of St Mary Radcliffe Church, Bristol.

SORABJI. PIANO WORKS. Michael Habermann. ASV Musicmaster Ⓢ Ⓢ ZCMM159; Ⓢ CDMM159 (65 minutes: ADD/DDD). Recorded in association with the Long and Widmont Memorial Foundation, Baltimore, Maryland. *Le jardin parfumé*—poem for piano. Prelude, Interlude and Fugue (recorded at a performance in Rocky River, Ohio on November 19th, 1984). Nocturne, *Djamf*. Pastiche on Rimsky-Korsakov's Hindu Merchant Song. Pastiche on Chopin's Waltz, Op. 64 No. 1.

At the time of his death at the age of 96 last year, Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji was becoming better known to the musical public for his actual compositions rather than for the legend of a crusty recluse who had eccentrically banned performances of his music. There were two misconceptions here. Sorabji did not exactly 'ban' performances: his music is of such extreme technical difficulty that it has needed pianists of the calibre of Yonty Solomon, John Ogdon, (here) Michael Habermann, and a few other modern virtuosos to do it anything like justice. Even now, some performances and recordings can only approximate to the incredible difficulties. But it must also be said that, if Sorabji became to some extent a recluse, he was a most warm, interesting and generous man, possessing a mind that ranged with a virtuosity sometimes as complex as his music, and as uncompromisingly. Those who knew him, or of him, only through his ferocious letters to the Press, and privately to critics and others who displeased him, can hardly have been aware of the humour and solicitude he could show, if he chose to raise the portcullis of his defences.

Perhaps the best introduction to his music is by way of Habermann's new record. It includes one of Sorabji's greatest early successes, a piece that won the admiration of Debussy, *Le jardin parfumé*. Here, elegantly and sensitively played, is a piece that for some 20 minutes discloses a fabulous array of keyboard sonorities, often contrasting them simultaneously, and sustaining its length more by a delicately judged play of contrasts than by any strong thematic organization. It is exquisitely sensuous music. The influences are, as is often said in writings about Sorabji, chiefly Scriabin and Busoni; latterly, others have pointed out that some of the opulence and complexity antedates Messiaen, who is actually a very different kind of artist indeed.

A problem latent in this manner of writing is, of course, form. Resisting the courses of the modern music of his youth taken by Schoenberg and Stravinsky, Sorabji seems to have found himself one of those composers, like Cyril Scott and Bernard van Dieren among others in this country, who were increasingly isolated by the times. Perhaps this helps to account for his withdrawal from a musical scene he had adorned with a pungent critical pen as well as his music; it did make difficulties with the organization of his music, when he liked to work on such a huge scale. I am not familiar with enough of his music to be too confident here; but it is noticeable how matters develop in his first three piano sonatas. The First makes some use of thematic cells, and harmonically is fairly close to Scriabin. I have failed to detect any controlling form in the Second, which strikes me as an unsuccessful piece. In the Third, Sorabji pre-faced the music with an analytical account and gave the music more conscious frameworks, as if

to answer the matter himself. Imposed forms are again evident in the next major solo keyboard work he wrote, the First Organ Symphony, in 1924. He felt this to be his first mature work. It lasts over two hours. The later organ symphonies are much longer.

Kevin Bowyer's performance of this vast work is beyond praise. As always with Sorabji, the score itself is intimidating to make sense of, with its coruscations of notes and its apparently confused textures. An organist with the patience and devotion to understand these, such as Bowyer, can disclose much that is not easily evident from the printed page. The opening Passacaglia reveals far greater variety of manner than appears from the score; the form is admirable for providing a tether to Sorabji's fantasizing imagination. The second movement is an introduction, fugue and coda (there is a strong fugue as one of the pieces in Habermann's recital). The final movement is harder to follow: Alistair Hinton, author of the helpful sleeve-note and now guardian of Sorabji's scores, calls it a "gargantuan 'free-fantasia' on the work's main themes so far . . . woven into the frequently complex musical fabric in an almost subconscious manner". I confess I have yet to receive this as the coherent experience he claims for it, though there are superbly impressive moments, and the climax is tremendous, with the B-A-C-H theme thundered out in chromatic, unrelated chords over pedal sextuplets that really need not an organist but a tap-dancer.

To those curious, then, about the music of this strange figure, I would unreservedly recommend Michael Habermann's record. The Prelude, Interlude and Fugue were recorded live, moderately well; the other pieces sound sumptuous. They include the long meditative Nocturne *Djamf* (a little over 20 minutes), which is perhaps naturally a darker piece than *Le jardin parfumé*, and a couple of amusing pastiches. The Organ Symphony, whose textural problems seem to have been remarkably well solved by the engineers, is rather more to take on board; but it has a rich stock of delights and fascinations for anyone drawn to Sorabji's world.

JOHN WARRACK